Alternatives to ion exchange water softeners are not new to the water quality market. In recent years, we have seen a number of new technologies as well as new twists on old technologies, and we continue to hear promises that these new products will change our paradigm.

To complicate matters, the overwhelming amount of information (and disinformation) available on all of these new products and technologies can be confusing at best. New terms like template-assisted crystallization and capacitive deionization only add to that confusion. We see products that call themselves salt-less softeners and salt-free conditioners, and performance claims that range from expected to reminiscent of the proverbial snake oil salesman.

If you are a traditional water treatment dealer, you can no longer ignore the rapidly growing category of alternative softening technologies, but it is hard to know what to believe. Most of us ask our long-time trusted suppliers first, but this may or may not result in a comprehensive answer, depending on whether the supplier is worried about losing customers to manufacturers offering alternative systems.

The fact is that our market is changing, and many good companies are investing in new technologies intended to be alternatives to the traditional softener. Let's face it—our market is not known for introducing new technologies every six months like some consumer markets. In some cases, it takes decades for meaningful advances in water treatment. So when a market-changing trend becomes clear, we need to take notice.

The reasons for the change and introduction of new products and technologies are many. Just about everyone in the U.S. has heard about the record-setting drought in California and other parts of the West. Scientists have been telling us for at least 20 years that our water supplies will struggle to keep up with rapidly growing demand due to population growth and climate change. It has even been predicted that the next world war will be fought over water. "Going green," "environmentally friendly" and "sustainability" are no longer just buzzwords, but rather suggest socially acceptable behavior.

Regardless of the reasons driving consumer interest in alternative technologies, you must have answers and options for every potential customer who contacts you. The percentage of callers asking for a no-salt solution for hard water issues is growing, and will only continue to grow—just do an Internet search for "water softener" followed by your zip code, and see what comes up. When the average consumer looks for information today, he or she will typically use a popular search engine, so he or she will see the same search results. Now, if this potential customer calls you, great—be thankful you got the call. Before that happens, though, be sure to consider some of the questions he or she will ask. Be prepared to give professional answers that will instill confidence in you and your business.

The Dilemma

There is not currently a recognized standard in the U.S. for scale prevention products other than traditional ion exchange softeners. The International Association of Plumbing and Mechanical Officials has been sponsoring the development of such a standard for more than seven years with the support of representatives from the industry, including from the Water Quality Assn. (WQA), NSF Intl., Battelle Memorial Institute, Arizona State University and more.

Creating a standard that will give customers confidence in products that achieve certification is a complicated task due to the wide variety of technologies that must be considered. It is likely that it will be several more years before a standard, once released, becomes widely accepted, considering the highly complicated nature of the subject.

On Feb. 27, a study sponsored by the WaterReuse Research Foundation titled "Evaluation of Alternatives to Domestic Ion Exchange Water Softeners" was officially published. The project was funded by the cities of Phoenix and Scottsdale, Ariz.; the Santa Clara Valley Water District (San Jose, Calif.); the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County; and the WaterReuse Research Foundation. The study evaluated four different technologies on their abilities to control or prevent hard water scale on heating elements using several different water qualities. Official versions of this study can be acquired for a modest fee at www.watereuse.org.

The WaterReuse study recognizes that not every possible product and technology and aspect of water hardness were evaluated. It would be virtually impossible, not to mention cost prohibitive, to do so. However, it is a valuable resource that can further the
education and understanding of water professionals from both the private and public sectors. Without a doubt, the study will fuel the growth of the market for alternatives.

**The Future & Expectations**

Ion exchange is not going away. It is a proven technology that has been meeting the needs of consumers for more than 50 years. The term “softener” connotes a water quality perception with which many consumers identify. Alternative products that use “softener” in their product descriptions may face challenges in meeting the expectations of the consumers who purchase them. Conversely, many consumers who purchase alternatives to traditional softeners will be delighted with the products that offer demonstrable performance. As a water treatment professional, you should know the differences in product performance, and be able to provide solutions that meet the needs and expectations of your customers.

As a member of WQA for more than 25 years, I am happy to see the movement toward embracing emerging technologies. Change is inevitable, and adapting to it is the key to success, both for water treatment professionals and the associations they belong to. Look for some of the best names in the business, along with many new names, to bring you new and exciting products to offer your customers.

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For more information on this subject write in 1001 on this issue’s reader service card.

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